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Maritime Folklore in the West Highlands: Some Mid-century Collectors and their Informants (1953–1970)

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Introduction

The people of Scotland have long held an interest in things folkloric. It can be argued that the interest in the vernacular tradition exhibited by the medieval monastic scholars of Iona, Melrose, Haddington, Elcho, and Aberdour, writing in Latin and Middle Irish and later in Scottish Gaelic, can be explained by their zeal to record and codify local popular beliefs, legends, and histories.[1]

However, it was not until the beginning of the eighteenth century that city folk, including lawyers and antiquarians rather than monastic scholars, became interested in folklore, primarily the poetic narratives sung by the maids and servants in their households. As an interest in national origins increased throughout the eighteenth century and crescendoed in the nineteenth, the collecting of both poetic and prose tales increased as well.

Scholars of the time noted the cultural and historical value of the narratives told in ballads. James Macpherson, a Scotsman, raised in the district of Ruthven, Inverness-shire, and educated at King's College, Aberdeen, indicated he had obtained manuscripts in western Inverness-shire, and on the islands of Skye, North Uist, South Uist, and Benbecula for further publication. Once the translation of the sources was finished, he began the adaptation of Scottish ballads for a popular readership in 1761.[2]

At this early stage in the history of folklore studies, the distinction between folklore and literature had not yet been made. The Ossianic lays published by Macpherson had to withstand strong criticism from other scholars of the time, who were not easily convinced that such things as native ballads existed. For example, a strong opponent of Macpherson's, Samuel Johnson, wrote of the Gaelic language:

> It is the rude speech of a barbarous people, who had few thoughts to express, and were content, as they conceived grossly, to be grossly understood. After what has been lately talked of Highland Bards, and Highland genius, many will startle when they are told, that the Earse never was a written language; that there is not in the world an Earse manuscript a hundred years old; and that the sounds of the Highlanders were never expressed by letters.[3]

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[1] See Kimm Curran, '"Through the Keyhole of the Monastic Library Door": Learning and Education in Scottish Medieval Monasteries', in *The Edinburgh History of Education in Scotland*, ed. Robert Anderson, Mark Freeman and Lindsay Paterson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 25–38.

[2] On Macpherson and the Ossianic controversy, see, for example, Fiona Stafford, 'Primitivism and the "Primitive" Poet: A Cultural Context for Macpherson's Ossian', in *Celticism*, ed. Terence Brown (Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1996), 79–96, and Mícheál Mac Craith, 'The "Forging" of Ossian', also in Brown, *Celticism*, 125–42.

[3] Johnson, Samuel, *A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland*, The Project Gutenberg eBook, #2064, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2064/2064-h/2064-h.htm, accessed 28 July 2025.

Instigated by such an example, Scottish scholars of the nineteenth century were extremely careful not to mix literature and folklore when publishing further collections. For example, *The Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (1862) was a four-volume collection of folk tales, and its compiler, John Francis Campbell, took extreme caution to collect the stories word for word. He included details of their narrators, the story's origin, the place where the storytellers resided, their occupation and age, and he placed the original Scottish Gaelic text alongside its translation in English.[4]

Collection of Scottish Gaelic folklore continued throughout the twentieth century, with a highlight being the activity of the School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh since January 1951.[5] The School of Scottish Archives are today part of the University of Edinburgh Library Heritage Collections and boast a rich store of legends, songs, and other items of intangible heritage, a substantial proportion of which are available online at the extensive Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o' Riches database.[6]

This contribution will focus on a specific topic of the collection: oral maritime heritage, and the wealth of legends and stories concerned with the sea and with water that are held in the School of Scottish Studies Archives (SSSA). And while the topic of our stories is concerned with water, yet, it is also, in the words of Lauri Honko, 'at least as important that the tradition is not connected with water in general, but to certain places where one swims, fishes, etc.'.[7]

The stories presented in this contribution were collected by the academic and technical staff of the School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh between 1953 and 1970, at various locations in the west of Scotland. Contributions from some of the School's most prolific informants, including Kate Dix (*Ceit an Tàilleir*) of Berneray, Harris, and Nan MacKinnon (*Nan Eachainn Fhionnlaigh*) of Vatersay are discussed in detail, alongside the work of important mid-century collectors including Calum I. Maclean, Ian Paterson and James Ross.[8]

Maritime Legends – Charms against Misfortune?

Maritime stories told by twentieth century Scottish fishermen cover a wide range of topics. One of the most popular is the recording of superstitions about antidotes against a disaster or shipwreck, as well as the portents of and the ways to protect oneself from drowning. An anecdote told by Donald Campbell to Calum Maclean in July 1953 in Borve, Barra, was about a local priest teasing a local fisherman named Iain Mac Caluim. And what seemed like a yarn to the former was a serious matter for the latter – keeping a little bottle of holy water on board his boat:

> *Maighstir Tormod a bha sa Mhorbhairne. ...] Bha e cho eòlach air Iain Mac Caluim 's bhiodh e a' tadhal air. Bha iasg aige a h-uile bliadhna nuair a bhiodh e a' dol a Ghlaschu, is bhiodh Maighstir Tormod a' tarrainn às:*

[4] His work and contribution have been given brief discussion in Francis Thompson, 'John Francis Campbell (1821–1885)', *Folklore* 101/1 (1990): 88–96.

[5] See John McQueen, 'The Work of the School of Scottish Studies', *Oral History* 2/1 (1974): 62–4; also Ailie Munro, 'The Role of the School of Scottish Studies in the Folk Music Revival', *Folk Music Journal* 6/2 (1991): 132–68.

[6] https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk.

[7] Lauri Honko, 'Four Forms of Adaptation of Tradition', *Studia Fennica* 26 (1981): 21.

[8] Several of the stories discussed here were collected by Calum Maclean. The AHRC-funded project led by Dr John Shaw devoted to the work of Maclean has been on-going at the University of Edinburgh since 2009; see https://www.calum-maclean-project.celtscot.ed.ac.uk; also John Shaw and Andrew Wiseman, 'From Spoken Word to Digital Corpus: The Calum Maclean Project,' *Oral Tradition* 28/2 (2013): 355–62. Many of Calum Maclean's recordings, some of them transcribed, are available at https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk.

"Dè a tha agad 's a' bhotail bheag a tha siud, Iain?"

"O rud leam fhìn, rud leam fhìn," ars Iain.

"'S ann a bh' orm," arsa Maighstir Tormod, "nam biodh uisge-coisrigte a dhìth ort gun dèanainn fhìn uisge-coisrigte dhut."

"Ò," ars Iain, "'s iongantach gun dean thu dhomhsa e 's nach dèan thu dhut fhèin e."

Father Norman […] knew Ian MacCalum and he used to visit him. He had fish every year when he would go to Glasgow and Father Norman would tease him: 'What do you have in that little bottle there Iain?'

'Oh, something for myself', said Ian.

'What's bothering me,' said Father Norman, 'is if you want holy water that I could make holy water for you.'

'Oh,' said Ian, 'it's funny that you would make holy water for me but not for yourself.'[9]

In this short story, one can see the wit of the fisherman, who is able to both keep his dignity and poke fun at the priest who was eager to make fun of him, as the latter settled the matter once and for all.

Of course, it was not all fun and games: fishing was a serious business, and the fishermen depended on signs and premonitions to keep them away from drowning and disaster. Seeing an extraordinary vision of blazing light at sea, called a *dreag*, was a premonition of death, possibly of some important person, such as a priest or a minister. The following account was recorded by Calum Maclean from John Campbell (*Iain Shéamais Aonghais*) on South Uist in 1960:

Calum Maclean: *An cuala sibh iomradh riamh air rud, air rud ris an canadh iad dreag?*

John Campbell: *Chuala agus chunnaic. Chuala, chuala...* Well*, an aon té chunna mise ceart riamh, 's ann aig muir a bha mi... Agus dh'fhalbh sinn à Glaschu beul na h-oidhche agus bha i gu math dona... Bha rubha dìreach aig Belfast agus bha solus ann agus dh'èibh mi air-san agus dh'iarr mi air an log fhaighinn ann a' shiod... Agus dh'èibh mi air a choimhead air a' log. Dh'fhalbh e sìos a' dol a dh'iarraidh na log agus chunna mi 'n gnothach ... cha robh soluis ann <bhon> a bha an Cogadh Mòr ann. Dh'fhalbh e sìos. Chunna mi fhìn an gnothach – bha e cho soilleir geal romham 's bha mi coimhead thall 's bha mi a' coimhead a-bhos. Cha robh mi faicinn gu dè bha a'deanamh an t-soluis… 's thug mi sin sùil os mo chionn... Bha i cho goirid sin dhuinn. Ma tha, bha an dreall aice, teine a bh' ann a' sheo innte, agus bha dealbh na ciste-laighe innte ceart cho soilleir 's gum biodh i leat air ar beulaibh ann a' shiod...*

Calum Maclean: *Agus bha iad ag ràdh gur e seòrsa do mhanadh a bha anns an dreag a bha seo.*

[9] School of Scottish Studies Archives SA1953.116.B7. Numbers beginning 'SA' refer to tape recordings made by researchers at the School of Scottish Studies, now part of the School of Scottish Studies Archives. The audio recording of this anecdote, along with Calum MacLean's Gaelic transcription provided here, can be found at Tobar an Dualchais, Track ID 5334. Unless otherwise noted, translations of the Scottish Gaelic text are by members of the Stories of the Sea project (https://cid.ulster.ac.uk/storiesofthesea).

John Campbell: *Manadh bàis, manadh bàis, manadh bàis a bh'ann. Bha ise a'deanamh air an dà rud – rud a bha a' dol a thachairt. Bha, fear nach fhac' thu idir. an dà chuid dhiubh.*[10]

Calum Maclean: Have you ever heard mention of a thing that they used to call *dreag* ?
John Campbell: I have heard of it and seen it. Yes, yes... the only one that I ever saw properly was when I was at sea... We left Glasgow at nightfall, and the conditions were bad... There was a promontory at Belfast with a light on it, and I called him and asked him to get the log there... And I shouted to him to look at the log. He went below to look for the log, and I saw the thing – there was no light there since the Great War. He went below. I saw the thing myself – it was so clear and bright in front of me, and I was looking back and forth [but] I wasn't seeing what was causing the light... and then I looked overhead...It was so close to us. Even so, it had a blaze, a fire in it here, and an image of a coffin in it quite as clear as if it were right there in front of us...

Calum Maclean: And they used to say that this *dreag* was some sort of premonition.

John Campbell: A premonition of death, a premonition of death, it was a premonition of death. It was pointing toward the two things – something that was going to happen. Yes, one that you didn't see at all.

This story is classified in folkloric terms as a memorate as it refers to a personal experience that includes a pronounced supernatural element.[11] Other supernatural sights or extraordinary events recorded from fishermen and boatmen have included seeing 'a phantom-boat' (*tàsg* or *farra-long*), also believed to bring bad luck. While this story describes a *dreag* seen from afar, the phenomenon can also be seen onboard, at the stern of a boat, as in the following account narrated to Calum Maclean in March 1953 by John McGillivray in Maryburg, Ross-shire, who had heard the story from a man in Àrd Dorch, near Loch Ainort on the Isle of Skye:

Thuirt e rium gum b' aithne dha bàta mu ochd troigh deug a dh' fhad. Chaidh a chur suas gu bràigh a chladaich a chionn gu robh sgioba a' bhàta a' faicinn solus timcheall air a deireadh air oidhcheannan nuair a bhiodh iad aig iasgach. Ghabh iad eagal gun tachradh bàthadh innte 's thug iad gu bràigh a' chladaich i. Chuir iad ann an geodha sàbhailte i 's chaidh a fàgail an sin. Dh'fhàs iad mì-chùramach oirre 's lìonadh le uisge i. Thachair aon fheasgar gu robh clann a' cluich timcheall oirre is thuit caileag bheag mu cheithir bliadhna a dh' aois innte 's chaidh a bàthadh. 'S sann le lainntear a chaidh an corp a thogail aiste, 's bha am bodach a dh'innis an sgeula dhomh am beachd gum b' e sin an solus a bhathar a' faicinn ioma bliadhna roimhe sin innte.[12]

[10] SA1960.19.A2; Tobar an Dualchais Track ID 38615.
[11] Such classifications are explained in detail in Marjatta Jauhiainen, *The Type and Motif Index of Finnish Belief Legends and Memorates*, Folklore Fellows Communications 267 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1988); Maxim Fomin, Séamus Mac Mathúna, John Shaw and Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh, eds, *Stories of the Sea: Maritime Memorates of Ireland and Scotland* (Berlin: Curach Bhán, 2016); and Maxim Fomin, 'Name Avoidance and Circumlocutory Terms in Modern Irish and Scottish Maritime Memorates', *Studia Celto-Slavica* 11 (2020): 51–68.
[12] SA1953.20.A2. Listen at Tobar an Dualchais Track ID 2618, where Calum MacLean's Gaelic transcription, given here, is also provided.

> He said that he had known a boat that was about eighteen feet long. It was moved up to the top of the shore because the boat's crew had seen a light around its stern during nights when they were fishing. They were afraid that a drowning would take place in it, so they dragged it up to the top of the shore. They secured it safely in a cove and it was left there. They neglected it and it got filled up with water. It happened one afternoon that children were playing around the boat and a little girl around four years of age fell into it and was drowned. Her body was lifted out of the boat by the light of a lantern, and the old man who told me the story believed that this was the light the people had seen in it many years before.

These two stories fall under the 'Portent of Death' category, and can be classified as a memorate and a local legend respectively. They exhibit a widespread international motif attested, for example, in Finland as 'A341 Death omen – a supranormal light, flame is seen'.[13] At the same time, we recognise that an intrinsic element of these stories is their 'milieu-morphological adaptation', their characteristic identification with the community in which they are told. As Honko explains, the external elements

> must sometimes be replaced by well-known natural features in the physical milieu of the tradition community. This adaptation may be called familiarisation. Belief legends and historical legends are generally given a concrete, plausible frame in the visible milieu. They could not otherwise derive their characteristic evidence of plausibility from the obvious immediate surroundings.[14]

Plausibility – the veracity of the event described in the story – is considered its most important characteristic. Physical surroundings, man-made objects embedded as features of the surrounding landscape, observations of conditions of the natural environment – all of these details are included to enable the audience to believe in the truth of the story. Without plausibility, the story could not be told.

An important feature of good storytelling is to continue in the same vein as the just-told story by narrating a similar one – only to make the next one sound more ominous and frightening. Immediately following John MacGillivray's account of the local legend from Àrd Dorch, Calum Maclean recorded the following incident as recalled by the Rev. Malcolm MacLean, who was also present at the same recording session in March, 1953. The tale includes similar incidents: the action takes place close to a body of water; the audience learns of the drowning as the pivotal event in the plot; and the plot establishes a connection between the drowned persons and the speaker, the only difference being that it is the crying heard near the seashore rather than the lights on the stern of the boat that serves as the omen of approaching disaster. There is further importance attached to its genre, in that the informant shares the story as belonging to his family heritage, saying he received it from his father. Because of that family connection, the story is classed as a fabulate rather than simply a local legend:

> *Well, ma tha, tha loch beag mu choinneamh a' Sgarp againn ann ann Leòdhas air a bheil Loch Thamnabhaigh. Acarsaid mhath agus àite math iasgaich a th' ann. Agus bliadhna dhe na bliadhnaichean bha m' athair, agus bràthair m' athar – bràthair m'athar a tha fhathast beò air a bheil Aonghus – agus dithis eile do Chlann 'IllEathain,*

[13] Jauhiainen, *The Motif Index of Finnish Belief Legends*, 72.
[14] Honko, 'Four Forms of Adaptation', 20.

bha iad le eathar iasgaich anns an loch sin oidhche, ceathrar aca. Agus bha iad a-staigh ris a' chladach agus an dorchadas ann, agus chuala iad duine a' caoineadh air... anns a' chladach, a' daor-chaoineadh anns a' chladach. Bha fhios aca a-nis nach robh duine beò air àrainn an àite a bh' ann, agus thàinig an caoch air m' athair-sa gus a dhol air tìr, gum feumaidh gun robh cuideigin ann, ach thuirt càch ris nach robh 's nach bitheadh duine anns an àite. Agus 's e àm iasgach nam bradan a bh' ann agus bha iad a' smaoineachadh gum faodadh cuideigin a bhith gam mealladh gu tìr ach am faiceadh iad cò bha san eathar, a bheil sibh a' faicinn.... Ma-thà, thàinig iad dhachaigh 's cha robh an còrr mu dheidhinn.

Ach an dearbh fhoghar sin fhèin thàinig muinntir à Leòdhas a dh'iasgach sgadain ann an Loch Thamnabhaigh, agus chaidh tè dhe na h-eathraichean fodha 's iad a' tarraing nan lìon. Chuir iad tuilleadh 's a chòir innte agus lìon i orra agus chaidh i fodha fon casan. Agus thàinig an càirdean, tha fhios agaibh, ga sgrìobadh, ach an togadh iad na cuirp agus fhuair iad na cuirp uile ach an corp aig aon fhear. Cha d' fhuaradh am fear sin riamh. Agus anns na lathaichean a bha iad a' sgrìobadh agus e a' failleachdainn orra an corp sin a lorg, bha athair an fhir a chaidh a bhàthadh a' caoineadh anns a' chladach dìreach anns an dearbh àite anns an cuala na Sgarpaich an caoineadh an samhradh ron a sin.[15]

Well then, there is a small loch across from Sgarp here in the Isle of Lewis, which is called Loch Tamnabhaigh: a good anchorage and a good fishing place. One year my father and my uncle – my father's brother who is still living and is called Angus – along with two other Macleans, they had a small fishing boat on that loch one night, the four of them. And they were in near shore after dark and they heard a man crying on the shore, and crying intensely on the shore. Now they knew that there was no one living in those parts, and my father took the notion to land there, for something must be there, but the rest told him it was nothing: no one could be in that place. It was the time of the salmon fishing, and they thought that somebody might be trying to entice them to land so they could see who was in the boat, you see. In any case they returned home and no more was said about it.

But that very same autumn, some Lewismen came to fish herring in Loch Tamnabhaigh, and one of their boats sank as they were hauling in the nets. They put too much in the boat, and it filled up on them and went down under their feet. And their relatives, you know, came to drag the bottom to see whether they could raise the bodies, and they got all of them except for the body of one man. That man was never found. And that day as they were dragging for the bodies, and failing to find that last one, the father of the man who was drowned was crying on the shore in the very place in which the Scarp people heard the crying the previous summer.

Despite its intrinsic local character and connection with familiar local landmarks, this story exemplifies an international motif registered in the motif-index of memorates and belief legends:

[15] SA1953.20.A3. Listen at Tobar an Dualchais Track ID 2621, where Calum MacLean's transcription is also provided.

'A431 Omen of death, accident – a cry for help, moaning, wailing portends death, accident'.[16] It is the father of the storyteller who wanted to go ashore to investigate the sound, in contrast to the rest of the crew who preferred to ignore it. The phenomenon, however, did not have any effect on the outcome of their fishing that day; the informant's father and his companions all returned home safely. As the story unfolds, however, it is a different group of fishermen that are lost – drowned because they have tried to load too large a catch into the boat, which sank under the weight of it.

The story has a moralising element, a warning about the dangers of excessive fishing. Control of fishing quotas was an important part of the collective welfare of fishing communities. This fabulate should be interpreted as a lesson to fishermen to avoid excessive fishing in the interest of protecting their lives.

Seals

Any fisherman understands that where there is fish, there are likely to be seals. Mary MacLucas from Benderloch in Argyllshire related to Calum Maclean an account she had heard from a certain MacDonald from Lismore:

> *Bha bràthair do… bha e 'na chìobair anns a' Chaisteal Dùghlas shuas an-seo. Shiubhail e co-dhiubh còig bliadhna a' sinach. Agus bha e... an àm a bhiodh e ri iasgach, bha bàta aige agus bhiodh e a' dol a-mach a dh'iasgach a-mach shìos an rathad seo.* Well, *bha ròn daonann ga leanailt:* aye, *ròn beag, ròn a' leanachd a bhàt' aige. Bha e ag ràdh a h-uile bliadhna cho luath 's a thòisicheadh an t-iasgach, bha an ròn… chitheadh e an-sin e.*[17]
>
> There was a brother of… who was a shepherd in Castle Douglas up here. He died there anyway five years ago. And he was...when he used to fish, he had a boat and he used to fish out from down the road here. *Well*, there was always a seal following his boat: *aye*, a small seal following his boat. He said every year that as soon as the fishing would start, the seal was... he would see it there.

While following a fishing boat might be natural behaviour for a seal, fishermen considered it lucky for them, too. Because it was thought that seals were able to predict storms, a friendly seal could warn fishermen against going to sea if a storm was approaching. Kate Dix, from Berneray, Harris, gave the following account to Ian Paterson about a woman who befriended a seal and saved many people's lives when the seal predicted the storm. She had heard the story from her father, who himself had first heard it as a child from the doctor's wife, a Mrs Livingston from Ross-shire who was living in Heisgeir:[18]

> *'S ann mu dheoghainn boireannach a thàinig à Siorramachd Rois, agus bha i a' fuireach ann a Heisgeir ma leth mhìle bhon a' chladach...Agus bhiodh i 'dol sìos a h-uile làtha chon a chladaich a' cruinneacheadh duilisg.... Agus a' latha a bha seo co-dhiù ann àm gealaich fhoghair 's ann a chunnaic i spot bheag am meadhan a' chuain, agus bha i a' smaoineachadh, "Uill...ma 's e ròn a tha siod, thig a-staigh agus feuch an inns' thu dhomhsa dè tha am muir a' ràdha."*

[16] Jauhiainen, *The Motif Index of Finnish Belief Legends*, 74.
[17] SA1958.80.A7; Tobar an Dualchais Track ID 38648.
[18] i.e. the Monach Islands, an island group to the west of North Uist.

Thòisich a' ròn air gàireachdaich ach ruith e staigh far a robh i. Agus, "Robh thu 'g èibheach orm?" ars eisean.

"Ò, bha," ars ise. "Bha mi deònach gun innseadh thu dhomh dè tha am muir a' ràdha."

"Ò, tha e a' ràdha an dràsda gu bheil sgadan gu leòr an taobh a-muigh dheth."

"Thalla, ma tha, ga iarraidh," ars ise "'s gu seall thu dhomsa 's gun creid mi thu."

Thug e a-staigh làn a' bheòil dhen a' sgadan, agus chreid i e.

"Thugainn còmhla riumsa dha mo thaigh fhéin agus mi aonranach. 'S bidh mi co math dhut 's a bhios mi dha mo nighean fhéin."

Dh'fhalbh an ròn còmhla rithe. 'S rinn i bonnach dha air a' ghreideil, 's bha iad 'ga h-ithe. Agus a h-uile madainn bha iad a' dol sìos ag iarraidh a' tiùrr a bhiodh a' tighinn a-staigh air a' chladach, agus an duilisg.

Ach nuair a bha gealach mhór t-fhoghair ann 's ann a chaidh iad sios an latha bha seo, agus dh'fhaighnich i dhe, "Dè a nis, dé a nis a tha am muir a' ràdha an-diugh?"

"Tha e a' ràdha, 'fhir a' bhaile, fhir na mara, fhir na mara, na teirig ro fhada o thìr. Tha stoirm mhòr a' tighinn a nall. Bidh i a' tàrrsainn air ur cinn'".

Dh'èibh i sin ris na h-eithirichean a bha a' dol seachad, agus thill iad agus shàbhail i beatha a h-uile duine aca.[19]

It was about a woman that came from Ross-shire, and she was living in Heisgeir about a half-mile from the shore. ... And she would go down every day to the beach to gather dulse. And anyway, it was on this day, at the time of the harvest moon, that she saw a small spot in the middle of the sea, and she thought to herself, 'if that's a seal, come in and see if you can tell me what the sea is saying.'

The seal began to laugh, but it headed in toward her. 'Were you calling me?' it said.

'Oh, I was,' she said. 'I was willing you to tell me what the sea is saying.'

'Oh, it is saying just now that that there is plenty herring out there.'

'Go on, then, and look for some,' she said, 'to prove it, so that I can believe you.'

The seal brought in a mouthful of herring, and she believed him.

'Come along with me to my house. I am lonely, and I will be as good to you as I will be to my own daughter.'

The seal went along with her. She made him a *bonnach* on the griddle, and they ate it. And every morning they went down to collect whatever flotsam was coming ashore, and to gather dulse. But on one particular day, at the time of the great harvest moon, they went down and she asked, 'What, now, is the sea saying today?'

[19] SA1970.296.A1; Tobar an Dualchais Track ID 36457.

> ‘It is saying, ‘men of the township, men of the sea, men of the sea, do not go too far from land. There is a great storm on the way. It will descend upon your heads.’
>
> The woman called out to the boats that were going past, and they returned, and she saved the lives of every one of them.

This folktale differs in several ways from our earlier examples. One notable feature is that both the woman and the seal are able to speak, and their ability to converse leads to their subsequently developing a close relationship. This is a feature characteristic of animal folktales, in which all of the characters typically can speak and share other human characteristics.[20] In addition, the story also takes on some overtones of a migratory legend, as the story presents a warning of impending disaster.[21]

Most strikingly, however, the protagonist of this tale is female, in contrast to the male protagonists of the local legends and fabulates cited above. Not only is she female, but she is presented as a fully-credible member of the community who can communicate with the departing fishermen – men who take her seriously and act on her advice. Typically, fishermen were governed by the taboo not to deal with women before going out fishing, as doing so would bring bad luck or disaster.[22] In this tale, however, the communication between the woman and the fishermen is presented in a positive vein, with the woman’s involvement proving crucial in saving their lives.

To explain her story’s plausibility, we may like to consider the fact that – unlike most storytellers, who tended to be male – Kate Dix would have had no trouble imagining her protagonist as a woman, and her audience would have had no trouble believing her. Born in 1890, Kate MacLeod, or ‘Ceit an Tàilleir’ as she was known in her community, was the daughter of Archibald MacLeod (*Gilleasba’ Tàillear*), originally from Balemartin, North Uist, who was himself known as a great storyteller. Having grown up in Berneray, Kate married Jack Dix, an English marine engineer in 1918, and they settled in Sunderland, where her children were born:

> *Bha mi shìos ann a’ Sunderland suas ri deich bliadhna fichead is bha triùir chloinneadh agam, agus tha mi uamhasach toilichte a ràdha gu bheil a’ Ghàidhlig aca cho math ’s a th’agam-sa… Is scrìobhaidh ’ad i, is léibhidh ’ad è, is gad a bha sinn ann a shen is gun facal Gàidhlig aig an duin’ agam, bha e daonnan deònach gun ionnsaicheadh iad Gàidhlig*.
>
> I was down in Sunderland close on thirty years and I had three children, and I am very pleased to say they have as good Gaelic as I have. They can write and read it, and though we were down there and my husband had not a word of Gaelic, he always wanted them to learn Gaelic.[23]

Returning to Berneray with her children during the Second World War, Kate Dix became not only a very active member of the community but also a willing informant for School of Scottish Studies

[20] ATU 150–199, ‘Wild Animals and Humans’; see Hans-Jörg Uther, ‘*The Types of International Folktale*, *Part 1: Animal Tales, Tales of Magic, Religious Tales, and Realistic Tales, with an Introduction.* Folklore Fellows Communications 284 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2011), 103–125.
[21] ML 6025–30, ‘The message of the fairies’; see Reidar Th. Christiansen, *The Migratory Legends. A Proposed List of Types with a Systematic Catalogue of the Norwegian Variants.* Folklore Fellows Communications 175 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1958), 161–162.
[22] Fomin, ‘Name Avoidance’, 52–5; Bairbre Ní Fhloinn, *Cold Iron: Aspects of the Occupational Lore of Irish Fishermen* (Dublin: Comhairle Bhéaloideas Éireann, 2018), 124–160.
[23] Ian Paterson, ‘Ceit an Tàilleir’, *Tocher* 20 (1975): 122.

fieldworker Ian Paterson, who recorded nearly 600 items from her beginning in 1967. With her deep knowledge of the island's familial relationships and a rich storytelling repertoire influenced by that of her father, she clearly possessed considerable self-confidence in expressing herself. Kate Dix's family background, as well as the perspective she gained from living for several decades in England, may explain why she would not shy away from placing a female protagonist at the centre of one of her stories.

Water horses and mermaids

Seals were familiar animals, and their curiosity and human-like qualities inspired folklore relating to them. But whatever magical characteristics the stories bestowed on them, these are animals that actually exist, and their relationship to human beings is generally depicted as beneficial. The sea, however, is mysterious, and there are many stories about other creatures inspired by that mystery.

Water horses, for example, posed a grave danger, and legends about them are widespread.[24] Informants reported life-threatening dangers associated with meeting or interacting with these creatures – encounters that were normally accidental, later recalled in connection with some sort of everyday activity that the informant was engaged in at the time. Mrs Janet Shaw from Jura reported to Calum Maclean in August 1953 about an incident involving her great-grandfather:

> *Bha mo shìn-seanair co-dhiù... bha iad aig an taobh tuath...a' toirt a-staigh eich a'* laird*. ... Agus bha an oidhche seo bha iad air falbh dh'obrach' nan each. Agus thàinig an oidhche orra agus bha… fhuair esan each aig ceann ... a' locha, chuir iad an taod 's an each 's thug e e chun na h-uamha far a robh e a dol a' d'fhanachd san oidhch'. Agus nuair a bha e air èirich anns a mhaidinn cha robh sgeul air an each… 'S e each-uisge a bha aige. Bha e riabhach a' loch' air a aodach. Agus bha iad a ràdh gur e aran coirce agus tombac a bh' aige 'na phòc', gur e a shàbhail a bheatha*.[25]
>
> My great-grandfather it was anyway...they were at the north side...taking in the laird's horses. ... This night they had gone to work the horses. And night fell and… he found a horse at the end of the loch, they put a rope on the horse and he took it to the cave to where it was going to stay for the night. And when he had arisen in the morning there was no sign of the horse... It was a water horse that he had. He was marked with stripes of the loch all over his clothes. And it was said that it was the oatbread and the tobacco that was in his pocket that saved his life.

This man believed that it was some oat bread and tobacco that had saved his life. In another story, collected in the 1890s and preserved in the Maclagan Manuscripts at Edinburgh University, Norman MacAndrew, originally from the Black Isle but living at Ardgay in Sutherlandshire, reported the following local legend about water horses:

> I heard my mother often telling about a water horse that was at one time in a loch in the parish of Rogart, and it would be coming up on the land sometimes. One Sabbath

[24] See ML 4085, 'The Sea-Horse and the Sea-Serpent' in Christiansen, *The Migratory Legends*, 75–7; B71, 'Sea horse. Horse living in sea' in Stith Thompson, *Motif-index of folk-literature: A classification of narrative elements in folktales, ballads, myths, fables, medieval romances, exempla, fabliaux, jest-books, and local legends*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955-1958 (the on-line edition, accessed 4 August 2025).
[25] SA1953.127.7; Tobar an Dualchais track ID 8722.

> evening it came out, and a lot of young lads who saw it proposed that they would have a ride on it. So away they went, and it appears it was quiet enough till they got on its back. They were saying there were twelve of them, and they all got on it – except one, but when he was going on, somehow he could not get up, and one of his fingers stuck to its back and he could not get it away. So, he asked his brother, who was one of those that were on the horse, to cut his finger through, which his brother did, and that was what saved him. The horse carried all the others into the loch, and they were all lost, and they said the water was red with their blood, and livers.[26]

In MacAndrew's story, cutting off a finger protected the person from being carried off by the water horse. A similar detail is contained in a story told in 1958 by Nan MacKinnon (*Nan Eachainn Fhionnlaigh*) of Vatersay during a visit by collector James Ross to the home Nan shared with her brother-in-law, Jonathan MacLeod (*Eòghann Dhòmhnaill*).[27] Here Nan recounts an incident where her grandmother, Màiri Iain Mhìcheal of Mingulay, met a 'sea horse' (*each mara*) as she was cutting seaweed to fertilise the potatoes, and was so frightened that she cut herself, leaving a scar that she later showed to Nan. Due to the personal character of the story and its connection to the speaker's family, it can be classified as a fabulate:

> James Ross: *An cuala sibh iomradh a-riamh aig daoine air an each mara?*
>
> Nan MacKinnon: *Chuala. Chunnaic mo sheanmhair an t-each mara, Màiri Iain Mhìcheal a chainte rithe. Bha i anns an tràigh a' buain langadal – 's e langadal a bhiodh iad a' cur ris a' bhuntàta ann am Mionghlaidh. ... Agus chuala i fuaim a bha seo an taobh thall dhi, agus thog i a ceann, agus bha an t-each air leum a-mach air a' mhuir, dìreach an taobh thall dhi, agus bha i ag ràdh gur e 'n druim aige a chunnaic i, gur ann glas a bha e, agus gu robh carragan air a'druim aige mar a chìtheadh sibh air na leacan – air leacan a'chladaich – agus leis an eagal a ghabh i cha mhòr nach tug i a' chorrag dhith fhèin leis a' chorran.*[28]
>
> James Ross: Did you ever hear anyone mentioning the sea horse?
>
> Nan MacKinnon. I did. My grandmother saw the sea horse, Màiri Iain Mìcheal they called her. She was on the shore collecting tangles – it was tangles that they used to put on the potatoes in Mingulay... And she heard this noise on the other side, and she raised her head, and the horse had jumped out of the sea, directly opposite her, and she said that it was its back that she saw and that it was grey, and there was dulse on its back just as you would see on the rocks – on the rocks on the shore, and with the fright that she took she nearly cut her finger off with the sickle.

If encountering a water horse was dangerous, seeing a mermaid was supposed to be an omen of bad luck, and it was also a premonition of bad weather. Fishermen seeing a mermaid were supposed to head for home as fast as they could. The following account was given by Nan's brother-in-law

[26] Maclagan Manuscripts MML8055, https://openbooks.is.ed.ac.uk//record/121766/1/0340096c. Centre for Research Collections, Edinburgh University Library.
[27] Nan MacKinnon and Jonathan MacLeod had lived in the same household since the death of Nan's sister some years earlier, at which time Nan had moved in to help raise her sister's children.
[28] SA1958.156.1–8. Tobar an Dualchais, Track ID 101190; 'Nithean os-nàdarrach' begins at 3:04 from start.

Jonathan MacLeod in response to a question from James Ross. As Jonathan describes an experience of his own, his account can be classified as a memorate:

> James Ross: An cluin thu duine a' bruidhinn air a' mhaighdean mhara, Eòghainn...?
>
> Jonathan MacLeod: *Chuala. Agus tha mi a' smaoineach' gura h-i a chunna mi – a' mhaighdean mhara. ... Bha latha breagha 's gun deò gaoithe ann, agus an grunnd cho clìor. Agus chunna sinn beathach, agus shaoil sinn an toiseach gun e ròn a bh' ann, ach nuair a thàinig e bàrr na fairge, dh'aithnich sinn air an t-*shape *aige nach e ròn a bh' ann idir. Agus cha do thuig sinn gu dè rud a bh' ann. Ach bha guaillean a' seo aige, mar gum biodh boireannach no duine a bh' ann, agus an còrr dhe 'na iasg, agus gruag air mar gum biodh air boireannach, na air fireannach air am biodh gruag fhada, agus thug sinn aon chairsteal na h-uarach 'ga choimhead, agus chaidh e fodha an uair sin, agus chan fhaca sinne tuilleadh e.*
>
> James Ross: *Dè a bha e a' dèanamh fhad 's a bha sibh a' coimhead air*?
>
> Jonathan MacLeod: *Cha robh e ach a' snàmh – bha e a' snàmh fon uisge 's air uachdar an uisg'. Ach tha seansa a rithist gun fhaca boireannach e agus fireannach, a mhuinntir a' bhaile a rithist.*
>
> James Ross: *Agus dé bhiodh iad a cantainn ma'n a' mhaighdean mhara – an e comharra na...?*
>
> Nan MacKinnon: *Chuala mise co-dhiù gur e droch-comharra a bh' ann a faicinn.*[29]
>
> James Ross: Have you heard anyone talking about the mermaid, Jonathan...?
>
> Jonathan MacLeod: I have. I think it was her that I saw – the mermaid... It was a fine day and there wasn't a breath of wind and the seabed was so clear. And we saw a creature, and we thought at first that it was a seal but when it came to the surface of the sea, we realized from the shape of it that it wasn't a seal at all. And we couldn't understand what it was. But it had shoulders, as if it were a woman or a man, and the rest of it was like a fish, and it had hair like a woman's, or like a man with long hair and we spent all of a quarter of an hour watching it; and it went underwater then, and we saw no more of it.
>
> James Ross: What was it doing when you were watching it?
>
> It was just swimming – it was swimming underwater and on the surface of the water. But there is a chance that a man and a woman saw her again, local people.
>
> James Ross: And what would they be saying about the mermaid? Was it an omen, or...?
>
> Nan MacKinnon: I heard anyway that it's a bad sign to see her.

Upon hearing Jonathan's account, Nan MacKinnon followed it with a local legend going back to her grandparents' era. The protagonist of this story was a man named Iain mac Ruairidh:

> *Chuala mi bodach a bh' ann am Mionghalaidh uaireigin dhen t-saoghal, ris an canadh iad Iain mac Ruairidh, agus tha 'n ùine cho fada bhuaidhe 's gur e còta mòr a bhiodh*

[29] SA1958.156.1–8. Tobar an Dualchais Track ID 101190, 'Nithean os-nàdarrach' begins at 4:13 from start.

orra a' dol dhan chuan agus éileadh – éileadh clò. Ach co-dhiù dh'fhalbh iad latha a bha seo dhan a'chuan 's chunnaic Iain mac Ruairidh a bha seo, chunnaic e a' mhaighdean mhara. Agus bha iad ag ràdha gun do dh'èibh i dha: "Iain 'ic Ruairidh, an fhaic thu mise?"

" A Leabhra, ma chì," ars' Iain Mac Ruairidh, "'s droch bhàrr déis' thu."

"An deach thu riamh," arsa ise, a'mhaighdean mhara, "an deach thu riamh," arsa ise, "'na leithid a chunnart reimhid?"

"Chaidh," arsa esan, "nuair a bha mi eadar an eilid 's an iomairt."

"Latha mhic do mhàthar," ors' ise, "gun robh fuasgladh facail agad dhomhsa."

Cha robh ach dh'fhàg iad na lìn is thug iad an taigh orra, 's cha robh sgath ann ach dìreach gun tug iad a-mach a'chreag leis a' stoirm.[30]

I heard of an old man one time ago in Mingulay, who they called Iain mac Ruairidh and it is such a long time ago that they used to go to sea with long coats and a kilt – a kilt of tweed. Anyway they set out to sea one day, and this same Iain mac Ruairidh, he saw a mermaid. And it was said that she called to him: "Iain Mac Ruairidh, do you see me?"

'I swear if I do,' said Iain Mac Ruairidh, 'that you are a bad sign.'

'Have you ever been,' said she, the mermaid, 'have you ever been,' said she, 'in such danger before?'

'Yes,' he said, 'When I was between the hind and the hunt.' [31]

'A good day for your mother's son,' she said, 'that you have given me a clever answer.'

They just abandoned the nets and headed for home, and barely reached the cliff with the storm.

The folklore motif in which a mermaid warns fishermen of an impending storm is widespread;[32] and the motif of the verbal contest contained in the dialogue between the mermaid and the protagonist is also registered in Scandinavian migratory legends.[33]

As one of the School of Scottish Studies' most prolific informants, Nan MacKinnon was visited by a number of different collectors and, unsurprisingly, she sometimes recorded different versions of the same material. During a 1964 visit from Celtic scholar Anne Ross, James Ross's widow, Nan told the story of Iain Mac Ruairidh and the mermaid somewhat differently, presenting it not simply as a local legend, but as a fabulate – as part of her own family's lore. Having earlier described the protagonist as a *bodach* ('old man'), this time she identifies him as a family member, her mother's great-grandfather – a re-identification that illustrates the fluidity and personal nature of much oral

[30] SA1958.156.1–8. Tobar an Dualchais Track ID 101190, 'Nithean os-nàdarrach' begins at 5:57 from start.
[31] i.e. 'in the firing line' between hunter and prey – a dangerous place to be. The mermaid admits that Iain has won the battle of wits, and lets the fishermen go.
[32] See B81.7 'Mermaid warns of bad weather' in Thompson, *The Motif Index*.
[33] See ML 4055, 'Grateful sea-sprite gives warning of approaching storm' in Christiansen, *The Migratory Legends*, 68–9.

tradition.[34] She does not mention that the protagonist and his crew were escaping a storm, as she did on the previous occasion. She does, however, respond to questions from Anne Ross about the mermaids, what they looked like, whether Nan had seen one herself, or whether people still believed in them:

Anne Ross: *Bha iad a'creidsinn ann a'mhaighdean mhara?*

Nan MacKinnon: *Bha.*

Anne Ross: *A bheil iad fhathast?*

Nan MacKinnon: *Chan eil, chan eil i ri faicinn' is ma tha iad ann chan eil daoine 'ga faicinn a nist 's neach …. thuirt e nach eil iad ann.*

Anne Ross: *Agus 'n cuala sibh naidheachd eile mu dheidinn a' mhaighdean mhara?*

Nan MacKinnon: *Thuirt mo bhràthair cèile gum faca esan agus gille òg eile. Innsidh e dhuibh fhathast nuair chì sibh e gum fac' iad i.*

Anne Ross: *Ciamar a bha i coimhead… ciamar a bha an coltas?*

Nan MacKinnon: *Bha iad ag ràdh gur ann mar gum biodh iasg a bhiodh a chuid ìseal dhi agus gu robh an ceann aice mar gum biodh ceann boireannaich agus gruaig bheag stiallach oirre. Gruaig bheag stiallach oirre agus sìos seachad air a'bhroilleach aic' mar gum biodh boireannach agus an còrr dhi 'na iasg.*

Anne Ross: *Agus a bheil i breàgha? A bheil i snog?*

Nan MacKinnon: *O chan eil, chan eil fios agam's a nist. Cha tuirt esan ach gur e siod an cumadh a bh'oirre. Thuirt e mar a chunnaic iad i, bha iad a'coimhead uan – a'coimhead nan caorach deireadh an earraich. 'S thuirt e gu robh an fhairge cho soilleir 's mar a tha far a bheil a' ghainmheach tha fhios agaibh, mar a tha'n fhairge réidh chì sibh grunnd cho soilleir... Bha iad ag ràdh – bha i fon uisge – cha b'urrainn dhaibh carachd amach às an àite ['s] a robh iad leis an ìoghnadh a ghabh iad… Cha chuala mise a nist gum faca duine anuas i …*

Anne Ross: *An do phòs duine a' mhaighdean mhara riamh?*

Nan MacKinnon: *O, cha do chuala mis' ann gun do phòs.*

Anne Ross: And did you hear another story about the mermaid?

Nan MacKinnon: My brother-in-law said that he and another young lad saw one. He will tell you later when you see him that they saw her.

Anne Ross: What did she look like? How did she appear?

Nan MacKinnon: They said that the lower part of her body was like that of a fish, and that her head was like that of a woman with a little bit of stripy hair. A little bit of stripy

[34] SA1964.77.A11; Tobar an Dualchais Track ID 21256. Nan's narrative is followed by their further conversation about mermaids as transcribed below.

> hair going down over her chest as you would see on a woman, and the rest of her was a fish.
>
> Anne Ross: And is she pretty? Is she nice to look at?
>
> Nan MacKinnon: Oh no, now I don't know. All he said was that she had that shape. He said how they saw her: they were looking after the lambs toward the end of spring. And he said that the sea was so clear, and the way it is where there is sand, you know, and how when the sea is calm you can see the bottom so clearly... And they said as well – she was under water – they could not move from the place where they were with the astonishment that took hold of them… And I haven't heard now that anyone has seen her since …
>
> Anne Ross: Did anyone ever marry a mermaid?
>
> Nan MacKinnon: I did not hear that they did.

James Ross wrote with much affection about Nan MacKinnon:[35]

> *Nan Eachainn Fhionnlaigh*, as Nan MacKinnon is called in her own community, was born in the township of Kentangaval in the island of Barra, in the year 1903. Her father, *Eachann Fhionnlaigh*, Hector MacKinnon, was a native of Barra, and her mother, the source of almost her entire repertoire, left her native Mingulay after her marriage to settle temporarily in Barra... Apart from some five years spent on the mainland of Scotland, in service or in the herring industry, Nan has spent all her life since that time on Vatersay, and since the age of twenty-two has been permanently settled there.

Although non-literate in Gaelic, Nan was 'a gifted conversationalist in her native language, with a superb knowledge of the traditions of her race'.[36] She possessed a vast store of songs, stories, proverbs and anecdotes which she was generous in sharing with collectors. Alan Bruford described Nan's repertoire as 'certainly the most varied and extensive in the archives of the School of Scottish Studies.'[37]

Conclusion

In this contribution, I have dealt with a collection of maritime folklore preserved in the University of Edinburgh School of Scottish Studies Archives, primarily focusing on stories from the Outer Hebrides recorded by fieldworkers and researchers from the School from 1953 until 1970. The narratives, often classified as memorates, fabulates, and local legends, are rich with supernatural elements, moralising messages and premonitions.[38]

Taken as a collective entity, fisherfolk's oral tradition encompasses a wide range of topics. Many stories focus on omens of misfortune – portents of bad luck or death, sometimes visible (such as a vision of blazing light at sea) or audible (such as crying heard near the seashore). Other tales describe encounters with supernatural creatures such as water horses and mermaids, talking seals predicting a

[35] Ross, 'Nan MacKinnon', 201.
[36] Ross, 'Nan MacKinnon', 202.
[37] Alan Bruford, 'Nan MacKinnon', *Tocher* 7 (1972): 201.
[38] See also Séamus Mac Mathúna, 'Fishing, Fishing Boats and Traditional Lore based on Maritime Memorates collected in the 19th and 20th centuries in Ireland and Scotland', *Studia Celto-Slavica* 12 (2021): 105–19.

storm, drownings and accidents. The many dangers involved in fishing and maritime life – from adverse weather conditions to other perils – inform most such stories. Embedded in the community's culture, tradition and history, the tales often contain a moral element, teaching listeners about proper exploitation of sea resources and warning against the dangers of excessive fishing, a practice that went against the collective welfare. Adopting an appropriate survival strategy, fishermen relied on beliefs and traditional practices that served community members on practical level and thus guaranteed the plentiful catch and their chance of survival.

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